



Hardship Educating my Heart

By Daniel Ocom, Education of the Hearth symposium, Rotterdam, May 12, 2014

My name is Daniel Ocom. I am a Ugandan and I live in the North-Eastern part of the Uganda. This part of Uganda passed through many upheavals i.e. political instability, civil war, cattle rustling, inter-tribal conflicts etc. This region has also suffered repeated natural calamities such as droughts, floods, famine, pest and disease outbreaks leaving many families barely unable to fend for themselves. This is my story of education of the heart.

I was born at a time when Idi Amin was president of Uganda. He conducted a reign of terror until he was overthrown in 1979. I was told Amin almost killed my father because he was a local police officer who worked under Obote's Government. As a result my father disappeared and abandoned the family for eight years. I was raised like an orphan even when my father was still alive. Out of 10 children born to my father, none went to school because my mother (a peasant farmer) was not able to provide for the family and at the same time pay for our education. So, I stayed home without any hope that someday I would go to school.

My father returned home in 1979 after Idi Amin was overthrown and hope returned to the family. Presidential elections were conducted in 1980, and Dr. Apollo Milton Obote was elected president. It was at this time that my father took us to school in Mukura Primary School where I started primary one at 8 years. My father started to rear livestock and grow crops for educating us since he could not be re-absorbed into the police because of his old age. The number of cattle kept on increasing and my father alone was overwhelmed with the work. So, I was withdrawn from school after two years to support him and stayed home till 1985. Although my father kept on assuring me that after my brothers had completed their education all the unsold cattle would be mine, I was not settled because I wanted to study.

Rebels and abduction

In 1985, tragedy hit again after Dr. Milton Obote's Government was overthrown in a military coup by General Tito Okello who became president for only six months. At that time the Karimojong Warriors invaded the region and started conducting cattle raids until National Resistance Army led by Yoweri Museveni took over power. All our cattle, sheep and goats were stolen and once again all hope was gone.

The situation got worse when the local people took up arms in 1986 and rebelled against the current government whom they accused of failing to provide security and conniving with the cattle raiders. At this time I was abducted and forcefully recruited into the rebel ranks at the age of 15 years. I was moved from one district to another and from one training camp to another. The rebellion was now at its peak & fighting spread across the entire region. I was cut off from my family, and later on, my father also passed away. All economic activities came to a standstill as people were moved to Internally Displaced Peoples Camps.

In July 1989, the rebel camp was moved close to my sub county (Mukura), which opportunity I had longed for, so that I could visit home. So I decided to escape and go home, I didn't care if I would be killed. Luckily I reached home only to find that all our houses were burnt to ashes, and the semi-permanent iron sheet house was broken down. By this time, I was 18 years of age and the war was still raging on. It was then that my mother spoke to me saying, *"My son you are now a big boy and I am worried about your life, why don't you go and pass time with fellow boys at school because you may also be captured as one of the rebel collaborators"*. I listened to my mother and accepted to go back to school though I knew I was only passing time. I was also not sure about the source of funding for my education. I was confused as to which class I would go to. I wondered how the rest of the pupils would react because I was old and taller than all of them. I also was not sure how I would cope with studies after I had been out of school for a long time? I returned to primary three but the teacher in that class denied me the opportunity to study, with reasons that I was too big for that class. He advised me to go to the next class (primary four), where I was also denied and sent to the next class (primary five). There, the class teacher welcomed me and assured me that I would succeed. He said, *"I know that you are trying to run away from the ongoing military operations but you have made no mistake, you are also running way from ignorance. So sit down for I am ready to teach you"*.

Break-through

This is where my break-through started, I worked hard to learn to read and write while at the same time struggled to understand English. At the close of that year I was promoted to primary six and I got motivated because the government had waived payment of tuition fees for all schools in war affected areas. I was encouraged with hope that I would earn a degree some day. I went on until I sat for Primary Leaving Examinations in 1991 and joined Ngora High School where I obtained both the Uganda Certificate of Education and the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education.

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However, all this was through a lot of struggle i.e. vending fish, carrying people on bicycles, burning bricks and charcoal, digging in other people's gardens, assisting in construction sites, fetching water to sell, etc) in order to pay for my education right from secondary school to the university. I am here to tell you that education has no limit. It is a key that can transform a human being since I am a living testimony of it. I am now in the Netherlands pursuing a master in Management of Development through support of the Dutch government. However, this is just one story but there are many young men and women who faced similar circumstances.

Meanwhile back home I work for the Rural Transformation and Development Initiative. It is a local NGO promoting sustainable development and food security among smallholder farmers, targeting formerly Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). I am the Executive Director and I am responsible for ensuring that my organisation achieves its vision of transformed and self-reliant rural communities in which every person (including women and children) enjoys their right to a life of dignity. My organization aspires to see healthy and economically empowered and self-reliant rural households free from deprivation.

"Daniel Ocom still hopes that one day he will be called Professor D. Ocom"